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# *La Belle Africaine: The Sudanese Giraffe Who Went to France*

## **Abstract**

### Abstract

In 1826, Mehmet Ali of Egypt sent a giraffe from somewhere in what is now the Republic of the Sudan to King Charles X of France. The first live giraffe ever to reach France, she arrived when public museums and zoos were emerging, inspiring scholarly and popular interest in science and the world beyond French borders. This article studies the career and “afterlives” of this giraffe in France and relative to giraffes at large in the Sudan, in order to trace a Franco-Sudanese history that has stretched from the early nineteenth century to the present. At the same time, viewing this connected history in the aftermath of the 2011 secession of South Sudan, when colonial and national borders appear contingent and subject to change, this article approaches the Sudan as a zone (as opposed to a fixed country) within global networks of migration involving people, other animals, things, and ideas.

### Résumé

En 1826, Mehmet Ali d'Égypte a envoyé une girafe au roi de France Charles X depuis un lieu situé dans ce qui est actuellement la République du Soudan. L'animal, première girafe vivante à entrer en France, est arrivé au moment où les musées publics et les zoos faisaient leur apparition, suscitant l'intérêt des experts et du peuple envers la science et le monde au-delà des frontières françaises. Cet article traite de la carrière et des “vies après la mort” de cette girafe en France et des girafes en général au Soudan, afin de retracer une histoire franco-soudanaise qui est née au début du XIXe siècle. Dans le même temps, en examinant cette histoire connectée au lendemain de la sécession de 2011 du Soudan du Sud, tandis que les frontières coloniales et nationales semblent sujettes à des modifications, cet article aborde le Soudan comme une zone (par opposition à un pays fixé), dans le cadre de réseaux mondiaux de migration englobant des personnes, d'autres animaux, des choses et des idées.

## **Keywords**

giraffes, Sudan, South Sudan, France, Egypt, museums, zoos

## **Disciplines**

African History | European History | Near Eastern Languages and Societies

***La Belle Africaine:***  
**The Sudanese Giraffe Who Went to France<sup>i</sup>**

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***La Tour Eiffel***

*Mais oui, je suis une girafe,  
M'a raconté la tour Eiffel,  
Et si ma tête est dans le ciel,  
C'est pour mieux brouter les nuages,  
Car ils me rendent éternelle.  
Mais j'ai quatre pieds bien assis  
Dans une courbe de la Seine.  
On ne s'ennuie pas à Paris :  
Les femmes, comme des phalènes,  
Les hommes, comme des fourmis,  
Glissent sans fin entre mes jambes  
Et les plus fous, les plus ingambes  
Montent et descendent le long  
De mon cou comme des frelons.  
La nuit, je lèche les étoiles.  
Et si l'on m'aperçoit de loin,  
C'est que très souvent j'en avale  
Une sans avoir l'air de rien.<sup>ii</sup>*

—Maurice Carême (1899–1978)

Le mât de cocagne © Fondation Maurice Carême, tous droits réservés

**Introduction: writing Franco-Sudanese transnational history**

When introducing their research on the Sudan to Anglophone colleagues, scholars in France often begin with an apology. In contrast to Britain, they say, France has been a desert for Sudan Studies, because France lacked a colonial relationship with the parts of the Nile Valley that now contain the two republics of Sudan and South Sudan. The event that stimulated this special issue on “Rethinking Sudan Studies” – a symposium held in Paris in November 2012 – belied this claim, by illustrating the vitality of French

engagement in the two Sudans via history, anthropology, linguistics, and other disciplines.

This article challenges the idea of Franco-Sudanese historical detachment by studying an exchange that predated Britain's active presence in the region by more than half a century. This exchange entailed the gift of a giraffe, which Mehmet Ali (1769-1849) of Egypt sent from somewhere in what is now the Republic of the Sudan to King Charles X (1757-1836) of France in 1826, seventy-two years before Britain conquered the Sudanese Mahdist state and created the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1898-1956). While scholars have lavished attention on this giraffe in histories of French culture and science, no historians of the Sudan have studied her until now. This article therefore takes a Sudanist's approach to explore how this giraffe's life and career can illuminate a transnational history connecting the Sudan(s) to France.

This study allows us to accomplish various goals. First, from the Sudanese perspective, we can surmount colonial-state and nation-state borders that are looking more contingent and ephemeral after the 2011 break-up, while recognizing the Sudan as a zone (as opposed to a clearly demarcated country) within global networks of circulation. Writing a Sudanese "zone history" rather than a national history allows us to escape from the boxes of present-day international borders, which do not match the states, societies, and regions that existed in the past. Second, from the French perspective, we can shrug off baggage from the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century "moment" of colonial history in Africa (Roberts 1990). We can then entertain possibilities that France or French people have had relationships with places that were never subjected to France's imperial domination – say, with countries like Kenya or Mozambique, or in this case, the two Sudans. Reciprocally, we can also investigate how the connections forged by Sudan and Sudanese people have jumped colonial borders, too. By studying this giraffe, nicknamed *la Belle Africaine* or "the Beautiful African" by an admiring French newspaper in 1827 (Jardin zoologique de Lyon 2013a), we can suggest, further, how different places – call them zones, countries, or otherwise – can be "enmeshed" in each other's histories (Rodgers 1998: 1). Ultimately, the history recounted here reveals what the archaeological theorist Ian Hodder has called "entanglement", meaning the layered and at times jumbled links that form among people, other animals, things, ideas, and

practices as they move across cultural and environmental contexts and historical strata (Hodder 2012).

This story of the giraffe shows, too, how histories can occur not only transnationally, through movements across borders, but also off-stage, so that the history of one place can occur somewhere else. Consider how French history “happened” outside France, when the explorer Samuel de Champlain (1574-1635), mapped out a place across the Atlantic Ocean in what is now Canada and called it Nouvelle-France. Likewise, Sudanese history has sometimes “happened” elsewhere, too. Think, for example, of the Muslim intellectual Ahmed ibn Idris (1760-1837), born in Fez (now Morocco), whose trips to the Hijaz (now in Saudi Arabia) prompted him to articulate ideas about Sunni Islamic reform (O’Fahey 1990). Ahmad ibn Idris never visited the Sudan. And yet, he “belongs” to Sudanese history, because through his students (who *did* go or return to the Sudan), he exerted a lasting impact on Sudanese Sufism and the culture of Sudanese Muslim devotion. To return to the giraffe, historians have generally treated her experiences in France as part of French history. I assert that her story belongs to Sudanese history, too.

On a methodological level, this article also aims to contribute towards rethinking Sudan Studies through its source base. Historians of the Sudan have generally relied upon certain kinds of texts: memoirs and biographies; Sufi treatises and Islamic legal manuscripts (such as land deeds and inheritance records); government documents (such as district reports, intelligence memoranda, and correspondence); and, to a lesser extent, oral sources. This study looks to material culture, too. It draws upon items in museum collections, including zoological specimens, paintings, and sculptures, while bringing insights from art history and the natural sciences to bear upon the history of politics, culture, and the environment. By using these sources to consider the role of a single giraffe as a historical actor – and as one who connected the Sudan to a far-away place like France – this study marks an innovation for Sudan Studies in its subject.

The article first considers how and why the giraffe left the Sudan via Egypt and reached France nearly two centuries ago. Next, it traces her migration to Paris in 1826, and surveys the cultural impact she had on France. After reflecting on the Sudan’s

historic role in supplying giraffes to the Mediterranean world, it closes by briefly surveying the “afterlives” of the Sudanese giraffe in France and of giraffes in the Sudan.

A small point of wording deserves explanation. Whether animate or inanimate, nouns in French carry gender. The French word for giraffe is feminine, so that one speaks of *la girafe* or *une girafe*, using the pronoun *elle* (“she”) as a referent. (Identifying a giraffe as a male would require further specification, e.g., *une girafe mâle*). By contrast, English nouns, if they do not refer to humans, are almost always gender neutral, and in the singular can be represented by the gender-neutral pronoun “it”. English speakers often describe a non-human animal as an “it”, implying a thing as opposed to a sentient being, unless they hold the creature in esteem (as for example, with a domestic animal or family pet, who may be called a “he” or a “she”). I call the giraffe in this story a “she”, not simply translating from French into English, but rather giving her stature as a protagonist. The use of “she” reflects a political choice to recognize a non-human animal as a participant in history. As a “she” and not an “it”, this giraffe is also a “who” and not a “what”, “that”, or “which”. The sub-title of the article reflects this choice, referring not to the giraffe *that* went to France (which might seem more appropriate in formal English), but to the giraffe *who* went to France.

One last clarification: This article studies France, the (two) Sudan(s), and the creatures who have lived there, through the career of one giraffe. But I would not call this article a study in “human-animal relations” as some historians have done in their works (Ritvo 1987; Mikhail 2014), because doing so suggests a sharp binary distinction between animals and humans. To be clear, I see humans as animals, too. It would be more accurate, therefore, to call this article a study of human relations with *other* animals, and especially with one other animal: the Sudanese giraffe who went to France.

### **The Stairwell at La Rochelle: finding big history in a small place**

La Rochelle, on France’s Atlantic coast, is a small town boasting a rich past. There one can trace many threads as they weave into world history. During the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion, for example, and in collaboration with English forces, La Rochelle became a bastion of Protestantism against France’s Catholic establishment. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, La Rochelle functioned as an

embarkation point for French emigrants heading to North America, and especially Québec. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the town hosted a formidable cadre of “Lumières” (intellectuals of the French Enlightenment), who scrutinized the natural world via fossils, shells, plants, and animals. These La Rochelle naturalists included men like Alcide Dessalines d’Orbigny (1802-57), who collected more than ten thousand specimens during a seven-year voyage to what are now Brazil, Peru, and other South American countries, and who founded the scientific field of micropaleontology. Later, after 1887, according to a local commemorative monument that stands flanked by two tusked elephants, La Rochelle sent three of its natives as “pioneers” (*pionniers*) and “peaceful conquerors” (*conquerants pacifiques*) to west Africa, where they asserted French claims to Côte d’Ivoire by developing the trade in cocoa and coffee (Bertaud 2003).

Many of these strands of La Rochelle history come together in the town’s Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, which illustrates the historical entanglements of people, and the consequent reconfiguration of objects. This museum houses materials ranging from the South American specimens collected by d’Orbigny and the sculptures collected by Frenchmen in Côte d’Ivoire, to bird illustrations sent to La Rochelle by John James (also known as “Jean Jacques”) Audubon (1785-1851). The son of French immigrants and slave-owners in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), Audubon moved to the United States to avoid conscription in Napoleon’s army and became a U.S. citizen. He achieved lasting fame as an authority on North American ornithology and as the namesake of a major natural conservation society, which flourishes today (National Audubon Society 2014).

Amidst this wealth of natural and man-made marvels, which testify to France’s engagement in the world at scales ranging from the microscopic to the global, a visitor to La Rochelle’s Muséum d’Histoire naturelle may miss another treasure – this one tucked into the stairwell leading up from the ground floor. Bearing a reticulated golden coat over long, knobbly legs, this treasure hovers between the science of zoology and the art of taxidermy, and between creature and object. “Giraffe” an old plaque announces at its base, Latin nomenclature then following, “of Darfur”, it adds; a gift from the Pasha of Egypt, she “lived for 17 and a half years in the Menagerie.” The plaque attests, in other words, that this is a *Sudanese* giraffe occupying the stairwell in La Rochelle – or at least,

she is “Sudanese” in that she came from a place corresponding to what is now Sudan (see Fig. 1).



**Figure 1: The stairwell in La Rochelle (photo by Heather J. Sharkey)**



Pursuing this lead, the historian can fill in details of the story. This giraffe, a female, was a gift from Mehmet Ali, the Ottoman governor and quasi-independent dynasty-builder of Egypt, to King Charles X of France. The man who suggested the idea to Mehmet Ali, and who handled her procurement, was a Piedmontese from Turin (we might now call him an “Italian”) named Bernardino Drovetti (1776-1852), who served as a French consul in Alexandria, a “discreet counsellor” to Mehmet Ali (Dardauid 2007: 23), and a “diplomat opportunist” in general (Lebleu 2006: 31-33). Others have described Drovetti as a professional grave-robber and wheeler-dealer whose ancient Egyptian loot – mummified humans, cats, and whatnot – made its way into the Louvre and other museums in Europe (Allin 1998: 51-57) while sharpening Anglo-French rivalries (Reid 2002: 38, 46). Drovetti dealt in zoological specimens, too, supplying wealthy European collectors. He had traded Sudanese animals in the past, having supplied “Sudanese horses from Dongola” (*chevaux du Dongola soudanais*) to the King of Sardinia and dozens of white-wooled Nubian sheep (“*moutons ‘de Nubie à laine blanche’*”) to Count Romanzoff, chancellor of Russia (Dardauid 2007: 24).

Around 1824, Drovetti advised Mehmet Ali that a spectacular gift to Charles X could help to win France’s goodwill. French interest in Egypt was high: Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) had just deciphered the Rosetta Stone in 1822. Through his Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Charles X had just issued a call to French travelers and consuls abroad, seeking zoological and botanical specimens for France (Allin 1998: 57, 65-66). At the same time, Mehmet Ali was engaging in risky ventures and needed, if not foreign support, than at least a minimum of opposition. These ventures included helping the Ottomans to suppress “rebels” (“nationalists”) engaged in the “Greek Revolt” (the “Greek War for Independence”, 1821-32) – a war that many French and British observers supported on the side of the Greeks.

Mehmet Ali was also busy building an empire of his own. In 1821, his son Ismail Pasha had invaded the Sudan, initiating the colonial era that historians remember as the Turkiyya or Turco-Egyptian period (1821- c.1885) of Sudanese history. (By this stage, too, Mehmet Ali may have already had eyes on Syria, an Ottoman territory that he sent his son Ibrahim Pasha to invade in 1831.) Mehmet Ali’s control over the Sudan in the mid-1820s meant that he was able to send orders from Egypt to military delegates in

Khartoum for the capture, care, and transport of a giraffe destined for France. Mehmet Ali was known to be ruthless, and his reputation helps to explain the success of his plans. He had slaughtered his major military rivals, the Mamluks, *en masse* after inviting them to a dinner party in the Cairo citadel in 1811; he had also created a conscription army so brutal that Egyptian peasants frequently maimed or blinded themselves to avoid its draft (Fahmy 1997). Given this reputation, military underlings were likely to take Mehmet Ali's orders seriously, even for just a giraffe.

But from where exactly did this giraffe come? The museum plaque in La Rochelle claims Darfur, the region bordering present-day Chad, but later accounts variously claim Kordofan, in the central western part of what is now the Republic of the Sudan (Jardin zoologique de Lyon: 2013b), or a region two hundred miles southeast of Sennar near the current Ethiopian border (Allin 1998: 41). The author of one recent article described her as having come from “the hilly province of Sennar, in Nubia” (Lagueux 2003: 231) – conflating the Blue Nile region with the far northern (main Nile) region of what is now the Republic of the Sudan. The American writer Michael Allin, who produced a popular account of this history, repeatedly called the giraffe an “Egyptian”, presumably because of her passage through Egypt under the aegis of Mehmet Ali, and called the men who captured and transported her “Arabs” (Allin 1998). These designations remind us how outsiders have historically viewed the Sudan as a great vague space and a hinterland to Egypt, while often using adjectives like “Sudanese”, “Egyptian”, “Nubian”, and “Arab”, in ways that attest to the fuzzy and variable understandings of geographical and cultural zones.

Giraffes abounded in the Sudan in 1824, so this particular giraffe could have come from one among several places. The giraffe habitat in this period included the territory south of Khartoum (into what is now South Sudan), east of Khartoum (the Blue Nile region), and west of Khartoum (Kordofan and Darfur) (Laufer 1928: 91; Molloy 1957: 85; Allin 1998: 41). But the origins for this giraffe do appear to have been along the Blue Nile southeast of Sennar from which river transport to Khartoum and then Egypt would have been feasible.

The giraffe's journey, which began late in 1825 with her capture, took her through Khartoum early in 1826 and then north to Egypt's coast. She sailed from Alexandria and

reached Marseille in southern France on October 23, 1826. Her traveling companions included two Sudanese caretakers. One was Hassan or Hassan el Berberi (Lebleu 2006: 62), variously described as a “Nubian”, “Arab” or “desert Arab”, and “Moor from Sennar” (Majer 2009: 127; Lagueux 2003: 237; Allin 1998: 72). The other was Atir, variously described as Drovetti’s “negro servant” and “former slave”, or as a “Sudanese negro” from Darfur (Lagueux 2003: 237; Dardaud 2007: 86, Allin 1998: 74). Here, too, against the context of Sudanese history, the various ways of describing the giraffe’s caretakers reflect the complex and shifting attributions of terms according to perceptions of skin color and blackness; Muslim and non-Muslim identity; language and lifestyle; and statuses of slavery, former slavery, and freedom (Sharkey 2003: 16-39).

### **Paris Bound: The regal giraffe and her entourage**

To the extent that the giraffe was Egyptian, she reached Marseille when this port already had an Egyptian community, whose existence testified to a recent reshuffling of people. This community consisted of those whom the French government called the “Egyptian refugees”: Arabic-speaking Muslims and Christians who had collaborated with the army of Napoleon and his successor, Jean-Baptiste Kléber (1753-1800), during the French occupation of Egypt (1798-1801). Having fled with the retreating French army in 1801, these refugees settled in Marseille where they received French government pensions. In fact, these Egyptians were of mixed origins: they included indigenous Egyptian Christians (Copts) and Muslims; Syrian Christians (especially Melkites of the eastern-rite Greek Catholic church); Muslims of diverse Ottoman backgrounds; and several Sudanese servants or slaves, who joined their owners in exile (Coller 2011).

The giraffe reached Marseille six months before another boatload of Egyptians arrived – the first cadre of study-abroad students that Mehmet Ali sent to France to train professionals for his regime. This group famously included Rifa’a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), a future luminary of the Arabic literary renaissance or *nahda* and an early theorist of Egyptian nationalism, who years later spent a sojourn-cum-exile in Khartoum and recorded some Sudanese memoirs (‘Abidin 1967: 391; Powell 2003). Recalling these coincidental connections between Napoleon’s Egyptian collaborators, the Sudanese

giraffe, and Tahtawi reminds us how exchanges were quickening along this Franco-Nilotic route of migration.

After wintering in Marseille, the giraffe set out for Paris on foot on May 20, 1827, along with her two caretakers, Hassan and Atir, and other animals that Drovetti was sending as gifts to the king – an antelope, two mouflons, and a roebuck from Tenerife, in the Canary Islands (Lagueux 2003: 234). Joining them was the eminent French naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844), whose theory of transformism based on his study of comparative anatomy vis-à-vis extinct and living species made him a precursor to Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and the theory of evolution (Lebleu 2006: 26). Saint-Hilaire, whose name now graces the street in Paris that runs between the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle on the one side, and the Grand Mosque of Paris on the other, knew Egypt, for as a scientist he had accompanied Napoleon on his conquest of the country in 1798. In 1827, Saint-Hilaire joined the giraffe in Marseille after venturing to the southern French city of Montpellier, where he had purchased an ichthyological collection for the natural history museum in Paris – a collection that had been gathered fifty years earlier by the English naturalist Joseph Banks (1743-1820) during voyages with Captain James Cook (1728-1779) in the South Seas (Lagueux 2003: 232). In Saint-Hilaire's behavior, we can see the convergence of imperialism, science, and museum making as well as the trajectories of French global engagement and competition with Britain in this era.

As the group prepared to leave Marseille, Saint-Hilaire decided that he needed an Arabic interpreter to communicate with the giraffe's Sudanese caretakers. Looking to the Egyptian refugees of Marseille, he hired Joseph (or Youssef) Ebeid, the son of a Christian soldier who had fought with Napoleon in Egypt and who had later in France joined the Mamlukes (Dardaud 2007: 66; Coller 2011), a new imperial corps of turban-clad soldiers whose dramatic costumes engaged Napoleon's Orientalist fantasies. He also employed a fourth person, a Frenchman from Marseille named Barthélemy Choquet. Newspapers called all four men *nègres*, leading two historians of science to conclude vis-à-vis the "white" Choquet that racial categories in this period in France were "unfixed" and "unstable", and that French audiences were fascinated by the human attendants who

became “as much a part of the exotic spectacle as the giraffe” herself (Harkett 2013: 149-50; Davidson 2013: 210).

Finally, before leaving Marseille, Saint-Hilaire decided that the giraffe needed an outfit to protect her from the elements. Portraits later produced in France suggest that she was already wearing something around her neck: a Koranic amulet, a gift from Mehmet Ali, which was said to have touched the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab (the Prophet Muhammad’s granddaughter) in Cairo (Lebleu 2006: 44). Now she received an oilskin raincoat tailored to keep her dry when it rained. Fashioned from royal blue fabric and embellished with the French royal emblem – the *fleur de lys* – on one side, and the arms of Mehmet Ali on the other (Dardauid 2007: 65), the raincoat made the giraffe an ambulatory symbol of Charles X, the French monarchy, and Franco-Egyptian relations as she walked northward through France. The raincoat may have had another significance as well. According to a historian of textiles, fitting the giraffe into this *fleur-de-lys* raincoat was “analogous to the *ancien régime* ritual of re-dressing, at France’s borders, foreign princesses who were to marry a Bourbon monarch or an heir to the throne. Like them, [the giraffe] was obliged to leave her country of birth forever and she belonged henceforth to France” (Majer 2009/10: 145).

The journey from Marseille to Paris was 880 kilometers, broken into daily trips of twenty to twenty-four kilometers. The entourage passed through a parade of French towns: Aix-en-Provence, Avignon, Orange, Montélimar, Valence, Vienne, Lyon, Auxerre, and so on to Paris. People climbed on trees and wagons and gathered in markets to see her pass. Saint-Hilaire soon hired gendarmes, realizing that the giraffe needed protection from aggressive humans (Allin 1998: 148). Meanwhile, the giraffe charmed her audiences by licking those who came close. When the giraffe and her companions finally reached Paris late in 1827, another famous scientist, the comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) came with his friend, the novelist Stendhal (1783-1842), to greet them. But the king did not. Urged by his daughter-in-law, Marie-Thérèse de France, the Duchess of Angoulême (1778-1851), who was the last surviving child of Louis XVI (1754-1793) and Marie Antoinette (1755-1793) and a stickler for rank and protocol, Charles X insisted that the giraffe come to see *him*, rather than that he go to see *her*. Consequently the entourage continued to the palace of Saint-Cloud west of Paris.

There, the king offered the giraffe some rose petals, which she ate from his hand (Dardauid 2007; Majer 2009/10: 153).

The giraffe did not live with the king. Instead she found her home in the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes, a public garden located in the Latin Quarter or historic university district of Paris. This garden, which inherited the animals that survived from the menagerie of Louis XVI following the latter's decapitation, played a significant role in the formation of the modern zoo. It combined the attractions of a popular, public spectacle (unlike the menageries of the pre-revolutionary period, which had been personal playgrounds for the rich), with an ostensible commitment to scientific research, all in an English-style setting, with trees and sinuous paths to suggest a romantic, unplanned landscape (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 1998: 103-11). In fact, the Jardin des Plantes contained a complex of buildings and institutions: the Ménagerie, natural history collection (now the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle with its Grande Galerie de l'Évolution and Galeries d'Anatomie comparée et de Paléontologie), affiliated laboratories, greenhouses, and gardens.

During her northward journey, and then in Paris, the giraffe became so popular with the French public that she inspired what historians have called *girafomania* ("giraffomania"). Her image appeared on ceramics, glassware, and textiles; and on everyday objects ranging from dishes and paperweights to hairbrushes and chimney plates. Bakers devised a cookie press (*moule à gaufres*) in her shape and made biscuits for children; a ladies' hairstyle and an outbreak of seasonal influenza (*grippe de la girafe*) were named after her, too (Lebleu 2006). Inspired by her Koranic amulet, jewelers designed a heart-shaped pendant that some French ladies began to wear (Majer 2009/10: 136). She even inspired a color – "giraffe yellow", a yellowish beige – in the new fashion magazines of the period (Majer 2009/10: 132). Meanwhile, lithographs and drawings often depicted the giraffe in the company of one Sudanese caretaker or two, next to a palm tree. With their colorful turbans and robes, these caretakers may now look like stylized Orientalist abstractions of "the African" or "the Arab". And yet, these figures – like the duo gracing a gilded porcelain teapot manufactured in 1827 and now owned by the Musée Carnavalet in Paris – represented two real men, Hassan and Atir

(Majer 2009/10: 139), who generated considerable public attention in their own right (Davidson 2013; Harkett 2013).

In fine art, Jacques-Raymond Brascassat “captured” the giraffe during her voyage in an oil painting entitled, *Passage de la girafe à Arnay le Duc* (1827). Now owned by the museum of *beaux-arts* in Beaune, the small French town that serves as the center of burgundy wine production, this painting shows the giraffe, wearing her amulet (though not her raincoat), proceeding with her Sudanese caretakers through verdant countryside. In 2014, the museum in Beaune exhibited Brascassat’s work within its Orientalist art collection, by “framing” *Passage de la girafe à Arnay le Duc* between two Algerian scenes painted a half-century later, when France had a firm grip on Algeria.<sup>iii</sup> A placard in the museum explained that these works were Orientalist insofar as they drew inspiration from the French conquest of Egypt (1798), the French conquest of Algeria (1830), and what transpired after both (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Beaune 2014).

In French art, the giraffe’s debut in Paris arguably inspired the genre of the animal sculpture, too (Musée de la Chasse et la Nature 2013). Her arrival set the stage for the monumental animal sculptures of Antoine-Louis Barye (1796-1875) and later the petite, whimsical sculptures of François Pompon (1855-1933). As a poor young artist in Paris who eked out a living by assisting the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), Pompon found his calling by observing creatures in the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes – although he drew inspiration, too, from ancient Egyptian art at the Louvre (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon 2014), much of which Drovetti the giraffe-dealer had wrangled for France.

Giraffomania also extended into literature. Poets, dramatists, and other writers, such as Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), wrote about the giraffe. In August 1827, six Osage Indians from North America arrived in Le Havre and went to Paris, where they visited the king at Saint-Cloud before going to see the giraffe in the Jardin des Plantes (Lescart 2013: 218). This visit prompted the novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) to write about the conjuncture of the giraffe and these Indians in France (Dardauid 2007: 119). In a satire entitled, *Discours de la Girafe au chef des six Osages (ou Indiens), prononcé le jour de leur visite au Jardin du Roi, traduit de l’arabe par Alibassan, interprète de la Giraffe*,<sup>iv</sup> Balzac crafted a dialogue between the giraffe and the Osage to

criticize Charles X. The Osage, who came from an area that the United States had bought from France in 1803 via the Louisiana Purchase, arrived in Le Havre claiming that one of their forbears had visited Louis XIV. Given, however, that their handler, a Frenchman from Saint Louis, had commercial motives, and made them into objects of public display that rivaled the giraffe as a popular attraction, their visit was arguably just a “parody of official diplomacy” (Harkett 2013: 154-55; see also Lebleu 2006: 152, 157) – albeit one that left the Osage impoverished in France and dependent on charity to pay for their return to America (Snoep 2011: 107).

The display of the Osage showed how, during this early nineteenth-century period, the exotic animals paraded before gawking publics included not just giraffes, lions, and elephants, but also humans. This kind of “ethnological show business” helped to make imperialism thinkable under the guise of science and rationalism, by boosting the confidence of viewing publics in their “knowledge” (Lindfors 1999; Rothfels 2002; Coombes 1994: 2-3, 63; Mitchell 1991: 7). The construction of “human zoos”, likewise, fortified emerging academic disciplines like anthropology as well as emerging racial and eugenic theories, while blurring the lines between humans and other animals (Blanchard, Boëtsch, and Snoep 2011: 20, 22).

One of the best-known cases of ethnological show business in Europe had involved the southern African slave woman named Saartjie (“Sarah”) Baartman (c. 1790-1815), who some fifteen years before the giraffe’s arrival in France went on display, nearly naked, as the so-called “Hottentot Venus”. Baartman inspired a kind of “Saartjiemanía” (Youe 2007: 560) that arguably anticipated the giraffomania surrounding *La Belle Africaine*. Coincidentally, both Saint-Hilaire (who led the giraffe to Paris) and Cuvier (who welcomed her to Paris) had examined Sarah Baartman’s body in Paris in 1815 in their capacity as scientists – noting what they regarded as her large buttocks and genitalia. After Baartman died that same year, Cuvier published Baartman’s autopsy in the *Memoires du Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle* (the museum’s journal) in 1817 (Crais and Scully 2009) – ten years before Saint-Hilaire published his own scientific description of “La Giraffe de Sennaar” (Saint-Hilaire 1827). In short, the giraffe and Baartman had mutual acquaintances in France, both received attention from scientists as ostensible



oddities of the natural world, and both helped to convince the French public that they had a firm knowledge of Africa.

In her literary manifestations, the giraffe gave critics of Charles X and his regime a discursive vehicle for avoiding press censorship. In plays, songs, and pamphlets, dissident literati presented the outlandish, ridiculous giraffe – or put words in her mouth – to mock the king in a way that they could not do in newspapers. They staged theatrical productions with titles like *La Girafe, ou le Gouvernement de bêtes* (“The Giraffe, or the Government of Beasts”, 1827), in which animals from a royal barnyard presented “a sort of puppet show of the news” (Lescart 2013: 216-17). They cast the giraffe as a player in French politics of the period.

The French public went gaga over this giraffe, in part, too, because her timing was right. Until her arrival, giraffes had been creatures of legend in France – famed not only for their outlandishly long necks, but also for their gentle behavior in spite of their wildness (Laufer 1928). The giraffe’s precedents in French history were meager. Consider that the French explorer, François Levaillant (1753-1824), had shot a giraffe in what is now South Africa and had sent its skin to Paris in 1785. Levaillant’s giraffe was the first *dead* giraffe to reach France. So unfamiliar were French taxidermists with giraffe anatomy that they stuffed this specimen oddly, as one can see in an elaborately-framed oil portrait now hanging in the Cabinet d’Histoire of the Jardin des Plantes (Anonymous, c. 1800) (see Fig. 2). Digging more deeply, one finds that Anne of Beaujeu (1461-1522), daughter of King Louis XI (1423-1483), had tried and failed to secure a giraffe for France; and that Louis IX (1214-1270), who died in Tunis while on crusade (becoming “Saint Louis” thereafter), had possessed a crystal giraffe figurine (Lebleu 2007: 10, 16). But that was it. Together, Saint Louis’s crystal giraffe, Anne of Beaujeu’s unattained giraffe, and even the oddly-mounted Levaillant giraffe could not match the first breathing and walking giraffe, who reached France in 1826 and enchanted local humans by eating from their hands.

French viewers may have realized, too, that the giraffe who arrived in 1826 was better than a unicorn. Creatures of legend for centuries, whose existence was attested by travelers abroad, unicorns were the subject of fading belief in France as the nineteenth century opened. Significantly, Cuvier (who had, again, examined Sarah Baartman and

the giraffe) weighed in on this subject in 1825 when he declared that had never seen – and did not expect to see – a living or fossil creature that had a symmetrical horn attached to a suture between two bones. Cuvier doubted whether a unicorn was anatomically possible (Lavers 2009: 151-52). In contrast to a unicorn, *La Belle Africaine* of the Sudan was a legend confirmed.



Figure 2: *La Girafe de Levaillant*, artist unknown (c. 1800), Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris (Photo by Heather J. Sharkey)

In one important respect, however, our giraffe was *not* new. She arrived in France through a process that had precursors in world history. She represented what the French scholar Olivier Lebleu has called the “*cadeau-girafe*” (Lebleu 2006: 10) – the gift-giraffe – in the provision of which the Sudan historically featured. Like lions, elephants, and rhinoceroses, giraffes circulated as a prestigious and high-value diplomatic currency (Laufer 1928: 36, 44, 55). But if the Sudan had the potential to supply giraffes abroad, then why were these creatures so rare and legendary in Europe, where kings, queens, emperors, and other potentates coveted them so intensely? To answer this question, one must consider the Sudan’s historic role as a long-distance giraffe exporter.

### **Sudan’s role supplying “gift-giraffes”**

From 1905 to 1907, James Henry Breasted (1865-1935) of the University of Chicago led an archaeological expedition to Lower Nubia. He was tracing sites from the Meroitic civilization (c. 2000 BCE-c. 500 BCE) that had once flourished in northern Sudan, leaving the dramatically narrow, dark-stoned Pyramids of Meroë as a legacy. In 1906, while trekking south of Abu Simbel near the Egypt-Sudan border, Breasted chanced upon elephants and giraffes etched in rock. He tried to guess their age, reasoning in his field notebook that, since elephants “have been extinct in this region for some 5000 years, and [giraffes for] nearly as long”, “...these reliefs must be at least as old as the age when these animals flourished here, i.e., 3000 BC” (Larson 2006: 24-25; see also Spinage 1968: 34-35 for a later estimate).

Giraffes were extinct in Egypt by the time Egyptian artists carved their images in friezes during the reigns of Queen Hatshepsut (1508-1458 BC) and King Tutankhamun (r. 1332-1323 BC) (Laufer 1928: 3, 19-23). Nevertheless, in Pharaonic Egypt, and still four thousand years later during the Islamic era, giraffes flourished in the zone corresponding to today’s two Sudans. In fact, giraffes abounded all over sub-Saharan Africa – from what is now Senegal and Gambia in the west to Kenya in the east, down to South Africa. And yet, only the area corresponding to what is now the Republic of the Sudan exported them to Lower Egypt and the Mediterranean coast (Laufer 1928: 36, 50, 79-80). The Sudan was able to export them because it had the Nile – a dependable water source and a (mostly) navigable river – which enabled giraffes to survive long and hot

journeys northward. Sudan was the likely source, for example, for the giraffe that Caesar marched in his triumphal procession in Rome in 46 BC, causing such a sensation that writers like Horace and Pliny later wrote about it (Laufer 1928: 58, 66-67).

This trend continued into the Islamic era. In 651 AD, when Arab Muslim forces, coming from Egypt, first reached the lands beyond the Nile's second cataract (the rocky stretch of the river that has roughly marked the Sudan at its northern extremity) they signed a peace treaty called the Baqt with the Christian rulers of Nubia. The Baqt required Nubians to pay the Muslim rulers of Egypt an annual tribute, consisting of "four hundred slaves, a number of camels, two elephants, and two giraffes". Successive Islamic regimes in Egypt demanded tributes, too, although details changed over time. For example, the Fatimid Caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775-85) demanded one giraffe annually from Nubia; the Mamluks in 1275 demanded three (Laufer 1928: 35). Fatimid and Mamluk rulers paraded these giraffes in public much as the Romans had done, enabling what the sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) famously described as "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 1899).

If demand for giraffes was so high, then why did the Sudan export so few? The answer pertains to logistical difficulties. The only practical way to keep a giraffe alive and to transport it over long distances was to tame it, and the only way to tame it was to capture it during infancy so that it would become accustomed to human interaction (Allin 1998: 70-71). This explains why our giraffe was about six months old when captured, and why she was initially tied to a camel for transport to the Nile at Sennar (Lebleu 2006: 44). Infant giraffes posed another logistical challenge: they needed lots of milk to survive their first year (Jolly 2003: 32). Hassan and Atir reported that, on her trip to Egypt and then to France, the giraffe consumed up to twenty-five gallons of milk per day – first from camels, later from cows (Allin 1998: 78). Three cows eventually sailed with her from Alexandria to Marseille to meet her needs. Later, the sale of one cow in Marseille paid for her *fleur-de-lys* raincoat while the two others accompanied her to Paris (Dardaud 2007: 65) as the artist Brascassat observed in his 1827 painting of their procession (see Fig. 3). In short, supplying baby giraffes with enough milk complicated their upkeep during long journeys from the Sudan into Egypt and beyond, and helps to explain the rarity of giraffes upon delivery abroad.



Figure 3: Close up of Brascassat's *Passage de la girafe à Arnay le Duc* (1827), showing the two milk cows and the giraffe's human walking attendants, presumably Hassan in front, and Atir in back with either Youssef Ebeid or Barthélemy Choquet (Photo by Heather J. Sharkey)

Transporting giraffes on the Nile was also complicated. According to Professor Gaffar Mirghani of the University of Khartoum, who had studied the export of another exotic animal – a hippopotamus – from Khartoum to London in 1849-50, the giraffe would have sailed on barges down the main Nile from Khartoum when the river was high in Spring, and would have been unloaded and reloaded at the unnavigable succession of cataracts near the Egypt-Sudan border (Allin 1998: 201). This scenario of loading and unloading matches an account from ancient Egypt, which suggests that the giraffe that reached Queen Hatshepsut around 1500 BC had traveled from the Sudan on five different Nile barges (Dardaud 2007: 33).

Again, giraffes trickled from the Sudan into Egypt over centuries, and Egypt exported them further as trophies for kings, queens, and other potentates. In the late fifteenth century, for example, the Mamluk ruler of Egypt sent a gift-giraffe to Lorenzo de Medici (1449-1492) – a gift so prestigious that, sixty-four years after Lorenzo died, a portraitist at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence painted the giraffe into the picture alongside his owner (Joost-Gaugier 1987). In the sixteenth century, the Ottoman sultan

Mehmet III (1566-1603) secured a giraffe in Istanbul (Laufer 1928: 67) and paraded it to celebrate his son's circumcision. When leaving to invade Hungary in 1595, Mehmet III marched out this giraffe as well (Mikhail 2014: 112). Sometime after Mehmet III's reign, however, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the Funj Sultanate (c. 1500-1820), was ruling a significant part of the Sudan from Sennar, the trickle of giraffes grew thinner for reasons that require further investigation. More than three centuries passed before another giraffe headed for Istanbul, as a gift from Mehmet Ali of Egypt to the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II (1784-1839). However, this baby died in 1823 for want of milk as it sailed into Istanbul's harbor (Laufer 1928: 67; Dardaoud 2007: 30; Allin 1998: 73).

Again, the Turco-Egyptian conquest of 1821 imposed a strong regime in Khartoum that had the power to extract occasional giraffes from the Sudan. At the same time, in Europe and North America, interest in collecting natural specimens was accelerating along with the growth of museums and zoos (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 1998; MacKenzie 2009). During the same hunt that yielded the future Parisian giraffe in 1825, hunters captured another female who went to London as a gift from Mehmet Ali to King George IV (1762-1830) of Britain. A delicate creature, she survived at Windsor Castle for two years – long enough for George IV to commission the Swiss artist Jacques-Laurent Agasse (1767-1849) to paint a portrait showing the curved neck that may have signaled her illness (Royal Collection Trust 2013).<sup>v</sup> Entitled *The Nubian Giraffe* (1827), this portrait included two turban-clad figures – though it is unclear if these depicted the giraffe's actual guardians or if a Hassan-and-Atir-style duo was becoming an artistic convention. After this giraffe died, the London Zoological Society (founded in the same year as this creature's arrival in England) set out to collect more giraffes, and in 1836 secured four youngsters, reportedly from Kordofan. These four prospered, mated, and became “progenitors of a long line of English-bred giraffes” (Laufer 1928: 91), offering what zookeepers at the time saw as proof of the human ability to master and domesticate nature (Ritvo 1987: 234), while suggesting in the long run the possibility of breeding animals in captivity to preserve species (Rothfels 2002: 8).

### **Postmortem: afterlives of the giraffe in France**

In 2013, the zoo in the Parc de la Tête d'Or of Lyon, in central France, displayed several large panels recounting the history of the Sudanese giraffe who passed through this city en route to Paris in 1827 (see Fig. 4). One panel minced no words when it described her recipient, Charles X, as having been “too old, too religious, [and] too authoritarian” (*trop vieux, trop religieux, trop autoritaire*) (Jardin zoologique de Lyon 2013c). Among French republicans and workers, Charles X was an unpopular king who allied with conservatives of the royalist and Catholic-church variety. Inspired by the giraffe’s passage to Paris, cartoonists of the period portrayed Charles X as a clumsy giraffe being steered on the road by a priest who held his reins (Jardin zoologique de Lyon 2013c). Even oil paintings that were meant to be flattering portrayed this king with a narrow head, long neck, and thin torso that made him seem “giraffish” (Gérard 1825; Dardauid 2007: 54; Majer 2009/10: 153), helping to explain why the giraffe analogy appealed to detractors.





Figure 4: Information panel about La Belle Africaine in the zoo of the Parc de la Tête d'Or in Lyon, May 2013  
 (Photo by Heather J. Sharkey)

After meeting the giraffe at Saint-Cloud, Charles X lasted for three years on the throne. He had just enough time before his ouster in 1830 to authorize a French invasion of Algiers, citing an alleged diplomatic insult – the “Fly-Whisk Incident” – as his *casus belli*. The historian Olivier Lebleu offered a fanciful analysis of the giraffe with regard to this episode: she was a “Trojan giraffe (*la girafe de Troie*),” Lebleu argued. She “stimulated the demons of imperialism” by bolstering Charles X’s self-image of imperial grandeur and prompting him to look enviously to North Africa, where invasion became thinkable (Lebleu in Dardauid 2007: 90).

Charles X died in exile in what is now Slovenia in 1836, six years after the Algerian invasion. By contrast, the Sudanese giraffe remained comfortable in Paris. She lived on milk from the menagerie’s two “Egyptian” cows and its South Asian zebu (*Bos taurus indicus*), along with hay and vegetables, including her favorite – onions (Dardauid 2007: 92). Her caretaker Hassan soon returned to Egypt, but the other, Atir, lived with her for a decade, sleeping by night in her enclosure, until he, too, returned to the lands of the Nile. By some accounts, Atir became a neighborhood fixture at the Jardin des Plantes, learning French, wooing Parisian ladies, and according to the menagerie’s police, returning from nocturnal adventures at dawn (Dardauid 2007: 93). The newspaper *Le Figaro* reported these tales about the “black” Atir with relish, resorting to Orientalist stereotypes about sexually powerful African men (Lebleu 2006: 151).

The Sudanese giraffe died from an inflammation of the lungs on January 12, 1845 when she was twenty-one years old – a respectable age for a giraffe in captivity (Encyclopedia of Life 2010). “If during her life she had been multiplied *ad infinitum* by artists and engravers,” observed Olivier Lagueux, an historian of science, then “she was literally after her death cut into pieces. It might therefore be more appropriate to speak of the afterlives of the giraffe, or rather the afterlife of the giraffes” (Lagueux 2003: 243).

Researchers at the Jardin des Plantes took out her heart, lungs, and other soft organs, and preserved them in formaldehyde, but then lost track of them. Researchers took out her bones and rebuilt her skeleton, which they donated to the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Caen, in Normandy, in 1869. Her skeleton remained on display in Caen until World War II, when it was incinerated during the Allied bombings that

liberated France from the Nazis and the collaborationist Vichy regime (Lagueux 2003: 243). The most durable part of her body was her skin, which researchers peeled off and stuffed. In a vaguely understood process that unfolded over decades, her stuffed remains eventually moved to a museum in Verdun, where they survived the World War I battles that killed nearly 300,000 French and German soldiers in this town alone (Lebleu 2006: 182).

The fact that the giraffe's body parts were preserved attests to her status as an animal (human or non-human) who was scientifically worthy (Alberti 2011). But the fact that the Jardin des Plantes let her skin go, so that her stuffed figure no longer "lives" in Paris, attests that giraffes became more accessible to zoos as the century wore on, making her skin seem less special with time. Judging from the eight giraffes now displayed in the Grande Galerie de l'Évolution (located on the grounds of the Jardin des Plantes), giraffes eventually reached Paris not only from the Sudan, but also from further south in East Africa.<sup>vi</sup> This is because trains and steamships were helping to speed up giraffe exports from Africa, as was the Suez Canal. Engineered by Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894), whose father Matthieu de Lesseps (1771-1832) had been a colleague, fellow Freemason, and diplomatic co-conspirator of the same Drovetti who had arranged the gift-giraffe for Mehmet Ali (Galtier 2006), the Suez Canal opened in 1869 and quickened traffic between the Red Sea and Mediterranean. The Suez Canal enabled giraffes to "invade" the zoos of Europe and North America during the late nineteenth century (Lebleu 2006: 182). During the 1870s, for example, Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913), the German trader of zoo animals – including humans for ethnological shows – secured many giraffes from the Sudan. Rather than travelling down the Nile to the Egyptian coast, however, Hagenbeck purchased giraffes in Kassala (an eastern Sudanese town close to the present-day Eritrean border), and arranged for their transport to Suakin on the Red Sea coast, where they were loaded onto boats for passage through the Suez Canal (Rothfels 2002: 53-59).

The history of the Suez Canal later looped around into the history of the Sudanese giraffe in another way. In the 1940s and 1950s, the director of Agence France Presse in Cairo, a journalist named Gabriel Dardaud (1899-1993), became aware of her story as the first live giraffe in France. Dardaud tracked her down, first searching in Egyptian

archives in Cairo, and then in France. But Dardaud's career in Egypt ended when he became entangled in another episode of French world history, namely, the Suez Crisis of 1956, or as Egyptians remember it, the War of the Tripartite Aggression (insofar as France, Britain, and Israel launched it together). For France, the war represented a last-ditch effort to preserve financial stakes in the Suez Canal Company after Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970) nationalized it; France was also attacking the Nasser regime for aiding anticolonial insurgents in Algeria. In the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, Egypt deported French and British passport-holders – including Dardaud. Thus Dardaud landed in Beirut (which English-speakers at the time sometimes called “the Paris of the Middle East”) and worked there till 1984, when, amid the Lebanese Civil War (1975-c. 1990), Hizbollah fighters pillaged his apartment and prompted his return to France (Dardaud 2007: 7-18). Back in France, Dardaud found time to publish his research from decades earlier in a book, entitled *Une girafe pour le roi* (“A Giraffe for the King”), which appeared in a second, posthumous edition in 2007.

Dardaud named his subject. He called her “Zarafa”, meaning “giraffe” in Arabic, simply because that was how the functionaries of Mehmet Ali had labeled the bundle of paperwork relating to her acquisition and dispatch to France (Dardaud 2007: 22). Leaving aside the many affectionate epithets that popped up in French sources at the time and later, such as *l'enfant des Tropiques* (child of the Tropics) (Dardaud 2007: 52), *la belle orpheline égyptienne* (the beautiful Egyptian orphan girl), and again, *La Belle Africaine* (the beautiful African) (Lebleu 2007: 108, 141), it remains unclear what her captors and caretakers had called her when she lived. Nevertheless, since Dardaud's book, most commentators have called her “Zarafa”.

Dardaud made another important contribution to studies of “Zarafa” by finding her stuffed skin. Initially, he followed her skin to Verdun, but then lost its (or should we say “her”?) trail, and therefore concluded that it (“she”?) had perished. He later found that her taxidermic avatar had survived the battles of World War I and migrated to La Rochelle in 1931, along with the stuffed remains of two tapirs, two elephants (one Indian, the other African), two hippopotamuses, a rhinoceros, an axis deer or chital, several antelopes, an eland, and a gaur or Indian bison (Lebleu 2006: 182). Her host in the La Rochelle museum, Dr. Étienne Loppé (1883-1954), was a twentieth-century naturalist

who evinced a late eighteenth-century-style passion for collecting specimens – especially from Oceania, such as a feathered diadem and lava head from the Easter Islands (Holley-Williams 1954). Thanks to Loppé, zoological and cultural relics from South America, Africa, South Asia, and Polynesia settled, reshuffled, in a new historical and geographical stratum within twentieth-century La Rochelle, France.

Dardauid's account became a touchstone for other writers, and inspired new studies. In 1991, the American writer, Michael Allin, a self-confessed devotee of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, produced his popular biography of "Zarafa". In 2006, Olivier Lebleu, who had stumbled upon the giraffe in La Rochelle, produced a lavishly illustrated study of "Zarafa" and of the giraffomania that she elicited in France as reflected in literary sources and decorative arts.

Interest in the giraffe gained so much momentum in France, that it paved the way for a feature-length animated film. Called *Zarafa*, this film debuted in 2012 and appealed to French children (Bezançon and Lie 2012). With its richly detailed and colored images, creative adaptation of historical events, and vaguely didactic, "feel-good" quality, this film resembled an American Disney movie. In other respects, however, *Zarafa* was a very French, and very postcolonial, film. *Zarafa* resembled a giraffe version of Audrey Hepburn: girlishly beautiful, elegant, and endowed with a gentle sense of humor. Charles X, by contrast, appeared as a simian fool: stupid, and more like a monkey than a giraffe. Hassan appeared handsome and dignified, dressed in a crisp white *jallabiyya* and turban. The film contained no "Atir". Instead it featured a brown-skinned boy named Maki (a South Sudanese?), who accompanied the giraffe and Hassan after escaping from an attempted slave raid on his village.

The movie ended happily for its humans, with Maki, back in a bucolic (South?) Sudanese village with thatched huts, no longer a slave but the contented patriarch of a flourishing family. Hassan found domestic companionship with a beautiful Greek lady pirate (a strong and independent career woman) named Bouboulina. *Zarafa* herself functioned as an ambassadress, fostering goodwill between and among the gift-givers – Mehmet Ali as well as Hassan and "Maki" (who stood in for the Nile Valley, the Islamic world, and Africa more broadly) and the French people, although not Charles X himself, whom the film portrayed as an idiot.

As a postcolonial fantasy *à la française*, the film *Zarafa* offered an optimistic tale of French-North African, Muslim-Christian symbiosis (see Fig. 5), while inspiring a follow-up work of historical fiction for children (Rouer 2013). Perhaps as a consequence of the involvement of Charles X, and because of the timing of its release early in 2012, the film *Zarafa* evoked not only Franco-Sudanese and Franco-Egyptian history, but Franco-Algerian history as well. In fact, the year 2012 marked the fifty-year anniversary of the end of the bloody 1954-62 war that had made Algeria independent from France. As *Zarafa* appeared in cinemas, intellectuals throughout France were organizing commemorative lectures, photographic exhibits, musical performances, and other events that tried to achieve some kind of “reconciliation of memories” for a war that still “remained a burning event” (L’Algérie 2012). The audience for these retrospectives included the large population of French citizens of Algerian Muslim heritage who, according to one estimate, numbered some 1.5 million in the mid-1990s, with many having emigrated to or been born in France long after the war had ended (Silverstein 2004:4). In short, for many adults who watched *Zarafa* in 2012, the appearance of Charles X was likely to recall the emotionally entangled history of France and Algeria.

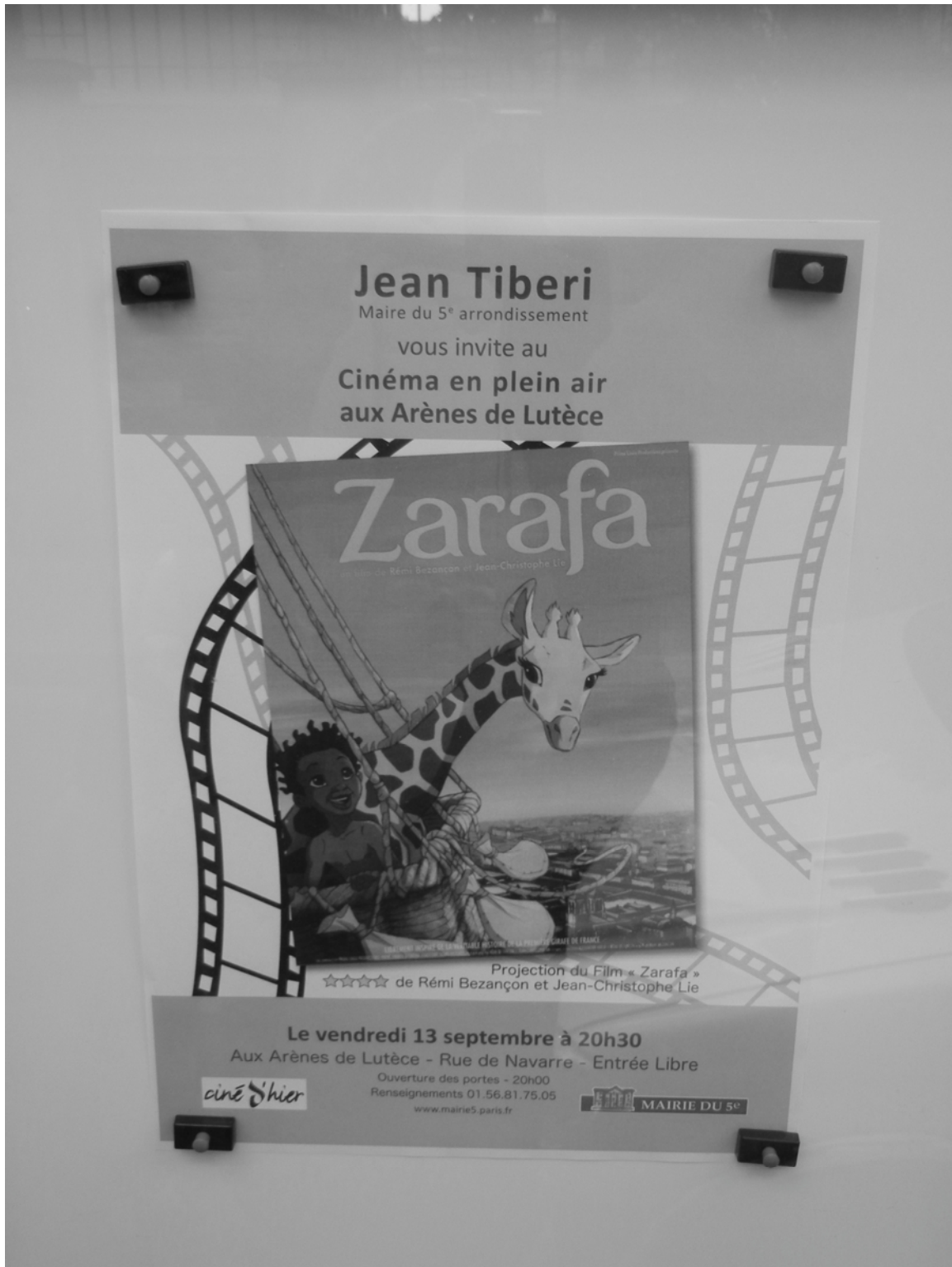


Figure 5: Poster on Rue Mouffetard of Paris, announcing a public open-air screening of *Zarafa*, to be held in the Gallo-Roman amphitheater of the Latin Quarter, August 2013 (Photo by Heather J. Sharkey)

### Sudanese giraffes: disappearance, memory, enchantment

When Mehmet Ali's son, Ismail Pasha, invaded the Sudan in 1821, giraffes were common around Sennar, the former Funj capital southeast of Khartoum, where local people hunted them and used their leather for shields and lances. So reported the French mineralogist Frédéric Cailliaud (1787-1869), who with the help of the ubiquitous Drovetti became the Turco-Egyptian expedition's prospector for gold and emeralds (Cailliaud 1826: Vol. 2, 272; Vol. 3, 63). But considering that the hunters who captured the giraffe for France in 1825 seem to have ventured well beyond Sennar, towards Ethiopia, to find her, it seems that giraffes had disappeared from Sennar itself within three years of the Turco-Egyptian conquest, probably from overhunting (Allin 1998: 41).

Hunting accelerated during the Turco-Egyptian period, and giraffe habitats shrank. Rifles proliferated and quickened the process. After the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian regime in 1898, British authorities began to regulate hunting among Sudanese locals, British and Egyptian officials, and foreign (especially European and American) tourists, though their efforts were ineffective or halfhearted (Carruthers 1997). The memoirs of hunters – such as the future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965), who hunted in the Sudan in 1908, and former U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), who did the same in 1910 – suggest the scale of the killing that rifles enabled (Churchill 1908; Roosevelt 1910; see also Stigand 1913; Chapman 1921; Savile 1925; Carruthers 1997). By 1951, giraffes were almost extinct in southern Darfur, where the region's pastoralist Baqqara Arabs had begun to inject their horses with a new medicine that they acquired on the black market. This was antrycide, and it averted the sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis) that tsetse fly otherwise spread, allowing horses and their riders to hunt for giraffes in southern lands where the threat of disease had historically repelled them (Molloy 1957: 85).

In 1958, two years after decolonization, the anthropologist Ian Cunnison (1923-2013) published an article about giraffe-hunting among the Muslim, Arabic-speaking, Humr community of Kordofan (one of the Baqqara groups), east of Darfur. As a work of ethnographic prose, this article now seems poetic in its beauty. Humr men told Cunnison that their grandfathers used to hunt giraffes on horseback by chasing them into muddy areas and spearing them. But in the 1950s they were hunting with rifles, which were mostly “French and British relics of the nineteenth century” (Cunnison 1958: 49), while



pushing into southern regions where the non-Muslim Dinka and Nuer people had not traditionally hunted on horseback themselves. Technically, the government restricted giraffe hunting tightly, but the Humr ignored them, killing giraffe in herds of three to seven in the forest or up to sixty in open plains and eating them in ways that significantly increased dietary meat consumption in villages (Cunnison 1958: 50; Molloy 1957: 141).

Giraffes seemed to enchant the Humr in the mid-1950s as much as they had enchanted the French in the late 1820s. “A kind of giraffe mania pervades Humr life,” Cunnison observed. Humr men, who were otherwise observant Muslims and did not drink alcohol, described giraffe soup (*umm nyolokh*) as “intoxicating”. People even reported dreaming about giraffes. “In the waking state, also, men swear that they see a giraffe through the forest or over the plain where there are none at all.” “In the absence of any physiological explanation,” he concluded, “these phenomena may [indicate] the extent to which the Humrawi’s being is permeated with thoughts of giraffe” (Cunnison 1958: 55, 60).

By the mid-twentieth century giraffes were nearly extinct in Darfur, though small numbers persisted in the far west, near Chad (Marais, Fennessy, and Fennessy 2012). They remained abundant, by contrast, in parts of southern Sudan, so that officials occasionally filed reports about giraffe (and elephant) herds that knocked down telegraph poles and disrupted communications. (Along the line between Bor and Juba, for example, officials had to replace 173 broken poles in 1943.<sup>vii</sup>) After Sudan gained independence from Britain in 1956, various factors pushed giraffes towards extinction in southern regions, too. These factors included overhunting, the erosion of government controls (including protection of wildlife preserves) amidst the 1955-72 and post-1983 rounds of civil war, the impairment of wildlife migration routes (as caused, for example, by construction of the Jonglei Dam), and competition for farmland and pastures from a burgeoning population of humans, cows, sheep, and goats (UNEP 2007; Ciofolo 1995: 577-78). The last factor became especially important as livestock production grew more important in the Sudanese domestic and export economy, satisfying human demand for meat (Suliman 1997: 104; Casciarri and Ahmed 2009). By 2012, conservationists estimated that South Sudan had fewer than 450 giraffes left – all of them in Boma National Park near Ethiopia (Marais, Fennessy, and Fennessy 2012).

In 2003, Human Rights Watch published a report surveying human rights abuses against Dinka and Nuer peoples living near recently developed southern oilfields, which the Khartoum regime was intent on controlling. Amidst harrowing details of violence, the report paused to reflect on ecology and wildlife. Traditionally, the “agro-pastoralist” residents of this area (in contrast to the Baqqara Arabs) had rarely hunted wild birds and mammals, although such creatures defined their landscape. “The names of rivers and towns in various Nilotic languages suggest this variety, for instance, Ghazal (gazelle) [as in the Bahr el Ghazal River], Jeraf (giraffe) [as in the Bahr el Zeraf or Bahr el Zaraf River], and Mankien (mother egret) [as in the town of this name]” (Human Rights Watch 2003: 78). Today, there are no giraffes left along the Giraffe River of South Sudan, though their memory persists in the landscape.

In 2010, as southern Sudanese people anticipated the referendum for secession, leaders articulated visions for a future country of South Sudan. The London *Telegraph* reported that for a projected cost of \$7 billion, “Juba, the region's rapidly-growing capital, will be re-designed into the outline of a rhinoceros. The city of around one million people will have a park sited in its horn and a 5-star hotel where the animal's eye would be.” It added that, “The region's second-largest city, Wau, is to be modelled on a giraffe, with a large industrial estate in its neck” (Pflantz 2010). Another source reported the opposite – that Juba would be the giraffe and Wau the rhino – and that the cost would be \$10.1 billion (Nerenberg 2010). Planners may have been looking to the example of oil-rich Dubai for inspiration in suggesting urban concoctions of this kind. While the implementation of these schemes has not materialized, the mere fact that someone thought up this plan for giraffe- and rhino-shaped cities – and announced it to the world – suggests the power of these creatures in shaping fantasies and hopes relative to South Sudan.

As Humr men suggested to Ian Cunnison in the 1950s, giraffes hovered in people’s dreams. This proved true in France as well, and not only in 1827 when the first live giraffe reached Paris. Consider a bizarre story that the historian Olivier Lagueux recounted about this giraffe – or rather, her stuffed skin – amidst World War I in Verdun. While some sources have speculated that her body was taken safely out of the town before fighting started, or even that the giraffe in Verdun was another giraffe altogether –

namely, the skeleton giraffe that the naturalist Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton (1716-1799) had acquired for Paris (see Lebleu 2006: 184; Cuvier 1860: 20) (see Fig. 6)<sup>viii</sup> – one report written in 1923 advanced another story. French soldiers found her during the fighting in Verdun, this report claimed, with neck and head peaking out of second-floor rubble of the town’s museum, and took her into the trenches. Lagueux called her the soldiers’ “saintly relic” and “improvised Joan of Arc from whom they awaited a miraculous intercession” (Lagueux 2003: 242-43). Because the giraffe, alive and then dead, exerted a talismanic tug on the imaginations of many French people who encountered her, Lagueux called his study of her a “hagiography” rather than a “biography”.



**Figure 6: Daubenton's Giraffe, Galeries d'Anatomie comparée et de Paléontologie of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris (Photo by Heather J. Sharkey)**

Writing in 1827, Honoré de Balzac put words into the mouth of the Sudanese giraffe in Paris when he had her warn the Osage Indians that if they died in France, their fate might be like hers – to someday be stuffed “to amuse the living” (Majer 2009/10: 147). Just as she (or Balzac!) predicted, she died and was stuffed. In retrospect, her story is sad but not tragic, since creatures of her species – the *Giraffa camelopardalis* – are still alive on Earth. Indeed, perhaps 80,000 giraffes still roam in Africa, albeit none in the territory corresponding to the Republic of the Sudan from which she herself once hailed (Giraffe Conservation Foundation 2013). And while she may be standing alone in a stairwell in La Rochelle, and not with the eight other giraffes that now loom over other stuffed creatures in the dramatically lit, cathedral-like atrium of the Grande Galerie de l’Évolution in Paris (see Philibert 2002), she is fortunate *not* to qualify for membership in the sepulchral hall where the museum displays the stuffed skins of extinct animals. For example, she is not standing in a glass case with the South African quagga (*Equus quagga quagga*), who belonged to a sub-species of zebra. According to the label outside his case, this quagga left Africa in 1784 and entered the Jardin des Plantes in 1794 with survivors of Louis XVI’s menagerie (see Fig. 7). Although he lived for four years in the garden, most of his peers died from starvation within a year (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 1998: 103-4). This stuffed quagga of Louis XVI now stares with glass eyes at a world in which creatures of his kind have been extinct in nature since the 1870s and in captivity since the last one died at the Amsterdam zoo in 1883 (Maas 2008).



Figure 7: The Quagga of Louis XVI, in a glass case at the Grande Galerie de l'Évolution in Paris (Photo by Heather J. Sharkey)

## Conclusion

Whatever we call her – *La Belle Africaine*, Zarafa, or just the Sudanese giraffe who went to France – the creature who dominates this study enables us to tell a multitude of stories. She was one in a long line of gift-giraffes across history, from antiquity to the nineteenth century, sent from the Sudan to glorify and impress rulers. Alive and then dead, she crossed paths with a surprisingly large and unlikely cast of interesting humans in settings ranging from Nile barges to the French royal court and a World War I trench. By migrating to France, she drew a line of Franco-Sudanese contact. A straight transnational approach can privilege a clean line of contact, even though the arcs of history, in practice, are likely to meander. Transnational history may also privilege nations when other spatial units of analysis may be just as relevant, such as empires, waterways (like the Mediterranean, or the Nile), and even vaguer so-called zones (with

“the Sudan” in the aftermath of the 2011 break-up now being a “zone”, as it was before the drawing of colonial boundaries). The study presented here is more of a zone history than a national history – one that studies a Sudanese zone in contact with France and the rest of the world.

Leaving aside the meanings of the giraffe’s story for French history, or for global environmental history, three points seem relevant to the history of *La Belle Africaine* as we rethink Sudan Studies after South Sudan’s secession. First, the new international boundary-line that divides South Sudan and Sudan need not stop scholars from writing about both countries within a common field of study. Nation-state borders are not sealed compartments for historical thought and inquiry; a larger Sudanese zone is a valid unit for analysis, too. Second, we can fruitfully scrutinize, and juxtapose, more *kinds* of Sudanese history. Histories of the environment, of material culture, and of the visual, literary, and audio arts seem particularly promising. And third, *La Belle Africaine* reminds us that Sudanese migrations have stretched well beyond Egypt and Great Britain, the two countries that colonized the region in the modern era. Sudanese history has extended into other corners of Europe – for example, to what is now Montenegro, where nineteenth-century traders from the port of Ulcinj gathered slaves from near Lake Chad (Lopashich 1958), a region historically connected to Darfur. Sudanese history has extended into North America, too. In the 1860s the French emperor Napoleon III sent a contingent of Sudanese soldiers to Mexico (Hill and Hogg 1995). Some of these soldiers, who had been captured as slaves in the Nuba Mountains and southern Sudan, returned from Mexico and settled in Bor, in what is now South Sudan, in a process of return migration that Bor people still remember (Tuttle 2013: 169, 188). In recent years many Sudanese have settled in the United States and Canada, too (Abusharaf 2002). Likewise, Sudanese history has extended eastward, to Arabia, Indonesia, and beyond (Sharkey 2004).

Migrations and movements lead to historical entanglements across space and time. When telling French history, for example, we do not need to stay within Paris, the Île-de-France (the area around Paris and Orléans from which the Frankish king, Hugues Capet [c. 941-996], and his heirs expanded), or the larger chunk of mainland France that French people nowadays call the “Hexagon”. We can venture farther to trace French

history across the sea in, say, Morocco. Likewise, in telling Sudanese history we need not restrict ourselves to greater Khartoum or metropolitan Juba (the capital city regions of the two Sudan republics), or the claimed borders of past or present Sudanese states. Sudanese history can go farther as well.

This last point is worth emphasizing. Just as French history has often “happened” in other places, such as Québec and Guyane (French Guiana) in the Americas, Guinea and Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa, or the enclave of Pondicherry in present-day India, so Sudanese history has happened elsewhere, too. (Historical encounters in the absence of colonial conquest still, as it were, count.) The life and career of the giraffe who left the Sudan in 1825 and reached France a year later offers one vivid example of how the Sudan became enmeshed in and entangled with a history that unfolded in France, a significant distance away from where she was born.

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<sup>ii</sup> My translation: "Why, yes, I am a giraffe, the Eiffel Tower told me. And if my head is in the sky, it is to better graze the clouds, for they render me eternal. But I have four feet planted in a bend of the Seine. One never gets bored of Paris: the women, like moths, the men, like ants, glide endlessly between my legs, while the craziest, the most nimble, climb and descend the length of my neck like hornets. At night, I lick the stars. And if you see me from afar, I very often swallow one as if it is nothing."

<sup>iii</sup> The paintings that flanked Brascassat's giraffe scene were *Intérieure arabe* by Edouard Darvot (1859-1921) and *Vue d'une rue d'Alger* by Félix-Jules Naigeon (1855-1904).

<sup>iv</sup> Translation: "Discourse from the Giraffe to the Chief of the Six Osages (or Indians), delivered on the day of their visit to the King's Garden, translated from the Arabic by Alibassan, the Giraffe's interpreter". During the Bourbon Restoration period, the garden

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was sometimes called the King's Garden (*Jardin du Roi*), instead of the Plant Garden (*Jardin des Plantes*).

<sup>v</sup> In its summary of the painting, the Royal Collection Trust describes this creature as a male, but she was female (Saint-Hilaire 1827: 211).

<sup>vi</sup> Two of the eight giraffes on display are of the subspecies *Giraffa camelopardalis tippelskirchi* (also known as the “Masai giraffe” or the “Kilimanjaro giraffe”), which “is native to east African savannahs in southern Kenya and Tanzania” (Encyclopedia of Life 2013). The other giraffes appear to be of the *Giraffa camelopardalis* and *Giraffa camelopardalis reticulata* variety that was widespread in the Sudan.

<sup>vii</sup> South Sudan National Archives (Juba), UNP/54.D.1, 1940-1959 (Upper Nile Province, 54 [Post and Telegraphs], D [Maintenance of Lines], 1 [and Complaints]), in box UNP/230, Assistant Director of Posts and Telegraphs to the Governor of Upper Nile Province, 26 May 1943. Thanks to Brendan Tuttle for this reference.

<sup>viii</sup> Lebleu suggests that the specimen in Verdun may have been the “Daubenton giraffe”. This was perhaps the stuffed skin of the giraffe whose skeleton now stands in the paleontology gallery in Paris. A museum placard identifies this skeleton as the giraffe of William V (1748-1806), Prince of Orange. Seized by French troops in The Hague in 1795, this giraffe became subject to study by the naturalist Daubenton in Paris.